Panther Solicitations Questioned in Ga.

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By Jeff Nesmith
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ATLANTA—When members of the Georgia chapter of the Black Panther Party visited Atlanta supermarket executive Fred Brown recently to solicit support for Panther charities, Brown lectured them on their attitude.

"They plopped down with their hats still on and smokes in their mouths and started telling me about their program," Brown said. "When they finished, I asked them how in the world they expected to get anything from anybody acting the way they did."

Brown, an executive with the "Big Apple" supermarket chain, said he later asked the pastor of his church to visit Panther headquarters and to find out what he could about the group's plan.

"They wouldn't let him in the door," Brown reported, "and told him if he wanted to see the place they would make an appointment for him. Now, how do they expect to get help acting like that?"

The Panthers said they were out drumming up support for a program which they said would "insure the survival of black and poor people" against racism and oppression.

In addition to the Big Apple chain, members of the party took their requests for support to Colonial Food Stores, Kroger Food Markets, the Rexall chain of drugstores, and to other businesses.

The brusk manner which Brown founs so unappealing has attracted the interest of law enforcement officials, who say they concerned that the Panthers may be trying to shake down local merchants.

"I cannot say to a certainty that they have ever threatened anyone," said District Attorney Lewis Slaton of the Atlanta judicial circuit. "Everytime they visit a place, they leave the people there with the feeling that they have been threatened, but when you get right down to it, you can't put your finger on an actual threat."

Slaton said he is concerned that the solicitations maybe a modern version of "the old mob business of selling protection."

During recent years, he points out, there have been incidents in which some black leaders have been accused of threatening to throw up trade-strangling picket lines around ghetto businesses if owners refuse to make monthly payoffs.

The Panthers deny there is any extortion involved. They say the size of donations is determined by the businessmen.

"We ask that they give in a regular manner so that we can plan the programs around the donations," the Panthers said in a statement.

If the businessmen refuse to donate, the Panthers said, they attempt to stop customers from shopping at the stores by picketing and distributing leaflets.

They have called the stores "corporate capitalist bandits" that have been "robbing black customers with high prices."

Because of their reputation as militants, the Panthers may be able to imply threats they don't overtly make, Slaton feels.

Instead, they merely "plop down" in a grocery executive's office with their hats on and their cigarettes and start talking about oppression, genocide and racism, then request financial support.

Mixed into the rhetoric, Slaton says, the message comes through.

Goal of the solicitations, according to leaflets left with some businessmen by Panther delegations, is to finance "Peoples' Community Survival Programs."

"The purpose of the Black Panther Party's existence in the black community is to serve the needs of the community and raise the political knowledge of the entire black, poor and oppressed communities in Georgia," a three-page written statement begins.

"To be specific, the Black Panther Party will protect the communities against any racist and reactionary attacks, manifested by the local KKK, racist members of the local police department, or any invasion by the National Guard, or any reactionary forces.

"Violence against the community also vents itself in the form of unemployment or indecent pay, robbery by local merchants, unfit housing for human beings, inadequate clothing, irrelevant educational institutions, hunger and racist railroading by judges and juries. This kind of violence is as bad as the club of a racist policeman."

The "Community Survival Program" that merchants were being asked to support will deal with this sort of thing, the party promises, by establishing:

- A free breakfast program for ghetto children.
- A "Peoples Free Clothing Program" that will provide "sturdy and stylish" clothes to ghetto residents.
- An "Angela Davis Peoples' Free Food Program." The leaflets explained to merchants that "capitalist exploiters have too long overcharged us for inferior food."
- Liberation schools.
- A sickle cell anemia research foundation.
- A legal educational program to provide free 'legal first-aid (how to prevent and handle arrests), free community legal aid classes and help in obtaining lawyers."

In the future, Atlanta Black Panthers say they also are planning such things as a free medical clinic, a free ambulance service, a free show factory, a free home repair service and a free busing program to provide transportation to and from prisons for the fa lies of inmates.

"You name it, they want said Ernest Boyce, presid of Colonial Food Stores, I "Their list includes dema for free clothing, free sh ambulance service, pest c trol, buses, drivers, gasoli tires, a long list of food. all there."

An executive with Kro Food Markets said Panth called on all Kroger store the Atlanta area demand cash in amounts ranging fr $1 per week per store to $ week per store.